

Were They Guilty?



The Rosenbergs were found guilty of spying for the enemy and executed for that crime in 1953. Why is their case still in the news 55 years later?

Characters

Prologue narrator

Narrators A-E

FBI agent

David Greenglass,
suspected spy

Emmanuel Bloch } the Rosenbergs'
Alexander Bloch } defense lawyers

Julius Rosenberg,
accused spy

Roy Cohn } team of
James Kilsheimer } prosecutors
Irving Saypol }

Ruth Greenglass,
wife of David

Ethel Rosenberg,
wife of Julius and sister of
David Greenglass

Epilogue narrator

All named characters were real people.

PROLOGUE

Prologue narrator: During World War II (1939-1945), the United States and the Soviet Union fought as allies. But soon afterward, a deep chill set in between the two superpowers. That tension and distrust became known as the Cold War. It was more than a dispute between democracy and **Communism**. Both nations were building huge stockpiles of the deadliest weapons ever known.

In 1945, the U.S. had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Besides causing immediate death and destruction, the A-bombs gave off radiation that led to illness and death for years afterward. When the Soviets tested an A-bomb in 1949, people around the world feared that nuclear war could break out at any time.

SCENE 1

Narrator A: In 1949, after the Soviets test an A-bomb, the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] intensifies its search for U.S. spies. Who, they want to know, is giving the Soviets classified [secret] information? The trail leads to David Greenglass. He had worked as a machinist in Los Alamos, New Mexico—at the U.S. lab that developed the first atomic bomb. In early 1950, the FBI questions him.

FBI agent: We're looking into claims that spies have been giving classified information to the Soviets.

David Greenglass: I know. I read the papers.

FBI agent: Then you also know that we've arrested Harry Gold, a chemist, as a spy?

David: Yes. What about it?

FBI agent: Gold just identified you as his contact.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (ROSENBERGS' MUGSHOTS); ROGER HIGGINS, NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM AND THE SUN NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (ROSENBERGS LEAVE COURTHOUSE); BETTMANN/CONRIS (DAVID & RUTH GREENGLASS)

David: I had nothing to do with him.
FBI agent: You're in trouble, Greenglass. Big trouble. You're going to jail—or worse.

David: No, wait! I'll help, I'll tell you what I know. Just don't bring my wife into this.

Narrator B: Greenglass writes a confession. He states that he gave atomic-bomb secrets to Gold in 1945—at the request of his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg.

SCENE 2

Narrator C: In July 1950, Julius is arrested and jailed. A month later, during a visit from his lawyer . . .

Emmanuel Bloch: They've arrested Ethel.

Julius Rosenberg: What about our boys? They're so young!

Emmanuel: Mikey and Robbie will be put in foster care. Don't worry. We'll beat this.

Julius: With every newspaper screaming about the Communist menace? We're Communist Party members. How can we get a fair trial?

Emmanuel: It'll be OK, Julius. No civilian has ever been executed under the Espionage [spy] Act.

SCENE 3

Narrator D: The trial begins in New York City on March 6, 1951.

Roy Cohn: Mr. Greenglass, tell us about the visit you had from Julius Rosenberg in September 1943.

David: He came up to my apartment. He asked what I had for him, and I told him I had a good description of the atomic bomb. He asked me to write it up for him and gave me \$200.

Cohn: Did you draw a sketch and write a description to explain it?

David: I did. My wife and I drove to the Rosenbergs' and gave it to Julius. Ethel was there too.



Above: The Rosenbergs leave the courthouse after being found guilty. Left: David and Ruth Greenglass gave testimony that sealed the Rosenbergs' fate.

Narrator E: David's wife testifies.

James Kilsheimer: You've told us about meetings you and your husband had with the Rosenbergs. Tell us about the one in September 1945.

Ruth Greenglass: Ethel was typing, and David was helping her when she couldn't read his writing. He explained the technical terms and spelled them for her. Julius and I helped a little.

Narrator A: The Rosenbergs' lawyer cross-examines her.

Alexander Bloch: You've said you think it's a crime to spy against the U.S. When did you realize that?

Ruth: In 1944.

Alexander: But you kept doing it?

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Words to Know

- **Communism:** a system of government based on state ownership of land and businesses. Individual freedoms are often limited.
- **grand jury:** a group appointed to decide whether enough evidence exists for criminal cases to go to trial.
- **petition:** in law, a formal, written request for judicial action.
- **transcript:** a typed or printed record of everything said, such as at a trial or an interview.

American History Play

Ruth: I've told the truth about what I did. I thought we were just sharing information for scientific purposes.

SCENE 4

Narrator B: The defense questions its client Julius Rosenberg.

Emmanuel: The Greenglasses say that you went to them asking for information about the atomic bomb.

Julius: I did not.

Narrator C: Julius continues to deny the Greenglasses' testimony. Then it's the prosecution's turn.

Irving Saypol: You were a civilian engineer working in the Army Signal Corps. Why were you dismissed from that job in 1945?

Julius: It was alleged that I was a member of the Communist Party.

Saypol: Were you?

Julius: I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might incriminate me.

Narrator D: The Constitution's Fifth Amendment guarantees that people cannot be forced to testify against themselves in a criminal case.

Saypol: Ruth Greenglass has testified that in June 1950, you told them that the FBI was closing in and gave them \$4,000 to escape to Mexico. A photographer testified that you went into his shop around the same time to have passport photos taken. Did you?

Julius: I have been in many photographers' shops. When my family goes out for a walk, we often stop to have pictures taken.

Saypol: Did you tell *this* photographer that you were going to France?

Julius: I didn't tell him anything.

Narrator E: The other defense lawyer questions Ethel Rosenberg.

Alexander: Did your husband ever mention to you that he was spying for the Russians?

Ethel Rosenberg: He couldn't have. He wasn't doing any such thing.

Alexander: Did your husband ever take microfilm photos of any national defense secrets?

Ethel: No, he did not.

Narrator A: Next, a prosecutor questions Ethel.

Saypol: Did your husband ever develop film at home?

Ethel: No. He tried once in 1950. But he did such a poor job that he decided it wasn't the hobby for him.

Saypol: When your husband was arrested, didn't the FBI take a developing tank and trays from your home?

Ethel: Well, I know that there was something like that lying around.

Saypol: Did you help your brother join the Communist Party?

Ethel: I refuse to answer on the grounds of self-incrimination.

SCENE 5

Narrator B: The defense, then the prosecution, sum up the case.

Emmanuel (to the jury): If you want to convict these people simply because you don't like Communists, this trial has been a waste of time. This case is about spying. There is no doubt that David Greenglass is a spy—he confessed to that himself. Ruth Greenglass admitted that she was in on this conspiracy [plot]. But she has never been arrested! Doesn't that strike you as strange?

Saypol: Imagine a wheel. In the center is Julius Rosenberg, with spokes reaching out like the tentacles of an octopus. They all connect to Rosenberg, who has one object: to help the Soviet Union. As for Ethel Rosenberg, she typed the description of the atom bomb that was given to the Soviet Union. She sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country.

Narrator C: After two weeks of testimony, the jury takes only one day to deliver its verdict: guilty. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are sentenced to death. In a separate trial, David Greenglass is sentenced to 15 years in prison. (He serves 10.)

Narrator D: After two years of appeals and protests, the U.S. Supreme Court turns down the Rosenbergs' last appeal. Michael, 10, and Robert, 6,

CHRONOLOGY: A DEEP CHILL

1948

The Soviets blockade Berlin, Germany—the Cold War's first crisis.

1949

In August, the Soviet Union tests an atomic bomb. That October, Communists take control of mainland China.

1950-1953

During the Korean War, China and the Soviet Union support Communist North Korea, while the U.S. supports democratic South Korea.

1952

The U.S. tests the first hydrogen bomb.

1953

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are executed for wartime spying.

1954

Senator Joseph R. McCarthy conducts hearings on his charges that Communists are serving as Army and civilian officials.

H-bomb test in the Pacific Islands.



Above: Michael and Robert Rosenberg around the time of their parents' execution. Right: Demonstrators against the death sentence gather the day before the execution.

had just visited their parents, not realizing it was for the last time. On June 19, 1953—Ethel and Julius die in the electric chair. They are the first American civilians to be executed for the crime of spying.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue narrator: For decades, Michael and Robert Meeropol (they were later adopted) have sought the full truth about their parents' case. Debate over the facts continues to this day. Some people think that the Rosenbergs were framed, others that they were guilty. Some question why Ruth Greenglass went free and David got a light sentence, while the

Rosenbergs were put to death.

“Our government executed two people based primarily on the oral statements of people who would themselves be found guilty if they didn’t testify [against someone else],” said Robert Meeropol.

In 1995, a former Russian spy presented evidence that Julius and the Greenglasses had been spies, and Ethel was not. But many questions remain.

This past January, Michael and Robert, a *New York Times* reporter, and a group of historians filed a **petition** in federal court. They want the U.S. government to release secret **transcripts** of **grand jury** inves-

tigations of the case. Could those documents settle all the questions?

“Whatever the historical judgment [is] . . . that is what we ought to be learning from,” said Michael Meeropol. “I think we have a duty to understand our past.”

—Alexandra Hansen-Harding
& Kathy Wilmore

➔ Think About It

1. Why were the Rosenbergs executed?
2. Do you think it was fair that they were put to death for that crime? Why or why not?

1957

The Soviet Union launches the first space satellite, *Sputnik 1*, causing concern in the United States.

A model of *Sputnik 1*.

1962

During the Cuban missile crisis, U.S. President John F. Kennedy demands that the Soviet Union withdraw its missiles from Cuba.

1964-1975

During the Vietnam War, China and the Soviets support Communist North Vietnam, while the U.S. supports South Vietnam.

1979

The U.S. establishes diplomatic relations with Communist China.

1987

The U.S. and the Soviet Union sign a treaty agreeing to reduce their nuclear stockpiles.

1991

The Soviet Union breaks up into 15 independent nations; the Cold War ends.

Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping with U.S. President Jimmy Carter in 1979.

